

Mexico's June presidential race to be dominated by two right-wing candidates

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Mexico will hold a general election on June 2 to elect a new president and Congress. The two main contenders for the presidency are Claudia Sheinbaum of the ruling Morena party (National Regeneration Movement) of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO), and Bertha Xóchitl Gálvez of the Strength and Heart for Mexico coalition, formerly known as the Broad Front for Mexico.

The latter is an electoral alliance between three longstanding Mexican political parties, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which until 2000 ruled Mexico for seven uninterrupted decades, the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), and the nominally social democratic Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Few are placing bets on Gálvez. Year-end polls showed Sheinbaum leading Gálvez by well over 20 percent. A January 18 poll by Enkol commissioned by *El País* showed Sheinbaum leading Gálvez by 54 percent to 27 percent, a two-to-one margin, with Jorge Álvarez Máynez of the Citizens' Movement Party at 3 percent.

In June, Morena won four of six governor's races, leaving the party holding 23 of 32 state governorships.

These results reflect the continuing popularity of AMLO and his party, which leads the Let's Keep Making History coalition with the Labor Party (PT) and the Greens.

Who are Sheinbaum and Gálvez?

Sheinbaum, a physicist by training, has a Ph.D in energy engineering and has written widely on energy, the environment and climate change. She was AMLO's Secretary of the Environment when he was head of Mexico City's government. She was herself elected head of the Mexico City government in 2018, resigning in June to run for president.

Sheinbaum's four-year Mexico City tenure included overseeing over 330,000 deaths, due to the failure to implement adequate measures to contain COVID-19. She ended reports on COVID deaths in April 2022, and ended the public health emergency in May 2023.

Sheinbaum botched handling the collapse of a metro line and a metro train collision in 2021 and 2023, respectively, that resulted in 27 dead and over 200 injured. She deployed 6,000 national guard troops early last year to the Metro for "security reasons." Income per family dropped in Mexico City while she was in office.

Gálvez claims she grew up in a small town without running water and was forced to sell candy on the street to get by. She plays up that her father, a teacher, was an indigenous Otomi.

Gálvez admits that as a teenager in the late 1970s she flirted with the Marxist Workers League (LOM), which was briefly the Mexican section of the Pabloite United Secretariat before most members dissolved into the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT). She claims this was because she

admired Rosario Ibarra, a crusader on behalf of those disappeared in Mexico's Dirty War against the left in the 1970s who was later selected as the PRT's presidential candidate in 1982.

Gálvez obtained a degree in computer engineering and then started a couple of small high-tech companies in the 1990s, one of which peddled "sustainable" services to luxury real estate ventures.

In 1999, she was recognized by the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, as one of the "100 Global Leaders of the World's Future," suggesting someone amongst the elite had noticed and was grooming her. In 2000, *Business Week* magazine named her one of 25 Latin American New Business Elite.

In 2000, President Vicente Fox of the PAN, who ended the PRI's decades-long dominance, appointed Gálvez as head of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples. She did nothing to reduce indigenous poverty rates, which remain over four times the national average, or improve indigenous access to health care or other social services.

Dispossession and displacement of indigenous peoples continued unabated during the Fox regime, as extraction of timber and minerals was prioritized.

Gálvez's political career has reflected opportunism and self-promotion throughout.

In 2010, Gálvez was an unsuccessful candidate for the governorship of her native state of Hidalgo, in an alliance of the PAN, the Labor Party, the PRD and Convergence (today's Citizens' Movement), against the PRI.

Gálvez first won office as a candidate of the right-wing PAN for mayor of a borough of Mexico City. In the 2018 federal elections, Gálvez competed in the Senate race for a Mexico City seat in a coalition with the support of the Labor Party, while she was also nominated for a Senate seat by the PRD. She lost the race but was elected to the Senate by proportional representation, serving as a PAN member.

Gálvez running for president this year in the PAN/PRI/PRD coalition reflects not only the diminishing political differences between these three parties, but also her utter lack of political principles.

Her campaign statements call for building a country of the middle class who "work, study and do better." She says that anyone can get ahead and become a businesswoman or even a political representative if she just "puts in the effort." Gálvez brushes aside that millions are forced to live in conditions of precariousness and exploitation, working long hours for low wages, or in the informal sector.

Gálvez insists she will maintain AMLO's social programs, such as his limited income supports, while vaguely promising to fix his "failures" in areas such as health, and lack of public security.

She also presents herself as "progressive" on limited fronts, supporting both the right to abortion, which the Mexican Supreme Court recently upheld in September, and LGBT+ rights.

Gálvez's rhetoric is aimed at those who may be disaffected with AMLO, while steering clear of stepping on the toes of Mexico's oligarchy and foreign investors.

A referendum on the AMLO administration

Above all, the June election will be a referendum on López Obrador's tenure in office, which Sheinbaum represents.

Year-end polls show approval of AMLO averaging percentage wise in the mid-60s, despite considerably lower marks on the economy, and especially public security. AMLO, overall, has exceeded the approval records of the last four Mexican presidents.

Some of this is attributable to modest cash transfers and minimum-wage increases that reached 130 million people. After a 20 percent minimum wage increase last January 1, the minimum wage has doubled in real terms during AMLO's term. However, the daily minimum wage remains at the miserable level of 249 pesos, about \$14.50, a meager \$434 per month.

López Obrador also introduced modest supplementary pension payments for people over 65 and scholarship or apprenticeship programs for youths. He also began a limited cash transfer program for farmers called "Planting life."

Yet the top 10 percent continues to grab 59 percent of the national income, resulting in one of highest levels of inequality in the OECD as measured by the Gini index. Mexico's 14 billionaires, the 25th highest number in the world in 2023, greatly increased their wealth under AMLO.

The masses of Mexico continue to struggle to get by. Mexico's poverty analysis agency, Coneval, published a report in August claiming that the poverty rate had declined from 49.9 percent of the population in 2018 to 43.5 percent in 2022. But this still amounts to over 55 million people.

The report at the same time conceded that extreme poverty—defined as people who do not have enough income even to buy enough food—had increased from 8.7 million people in 2018 to 9.1 million in 2022.

Moreover, the report said, the number of people reporting money problems relating to healthcare rose from 16.2 percent of the population in 2018 to 39.1 percent in 2022.

Two-thirds of the population remain unbanked, and less than 5 percent hold home mortgages.

Many families are forced to rely on the more than \$60 billion in remittances from Mexican workers abroad, mostly in the US.

AMLO nevertheless has been a darling of "pink tiders" and pseudo-left currents such as the Democratic Socialists of America and its related publication *Jacobin*. And right-wing financial voices, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, have routinely bemoaned AMLO's taking a supposed "hard left" turn.

A more accurate and candid description of AMLO's real role was provided by one who knows whereof he speaks, Dante Delgado, a long-time senior functionary and former ambassador under the PRI's rule who founded the Citizens' Movement as a champion of a "social market economy": "Andres is [in reality] a conservative, and he knows it, but he is a [verbal] champion of left-wing exercises. But no decision is left-wing, none."

AMLO campaigned on curbing military abuses and violence, promising to "send the military to the barracks." Instead, he pursued close ties with the military brass, who became a major prop of his rule. AMLO formed a National Guard of over 100,000 troops that militarized and replaced the federal police. It is mostly made up of Army and Navy soldiers and is run and trained by the military, but it was enshrined in the constitution as a "civilian institution" under the Public Security Ministry.

Despite claiming when he took office that he would leave no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of the disappearing and killing of the 43 Ayotzinapa rural teaching students in southern Guerrero state in 2014, AMLO has protected the upper ranks of the military, which have been

complicit in covering up the role of the army in this atrocity.

Mexico's armed forces will receive a whopping 81 percent increase under the Finance Ministry's proposed budget for 2024. This can only be viewed as preparation for mass repression.

AMLO embraced austerity measures throughout his tenure. He pursued a tight fiscal policy, which he called "republican austerity." He refrained from any stimulus to counter COVID.

In addition to spending on the military, the other big exceptions were his two pet projects: \$12.5 billion to construct the Dos Bocas oil refinery for the national oil company, Pemex, and \$9 billion to construct the "Maya Train" to connect resort areas in the largely impoverished southeast of the country.

AMLO backed the decisions by the central bank to keep interest rates high during the pandemic and hike them further when inflation reappeared, maintaining a record high of 11.25 percent in 2023. Mexican inflation was around 7.5 percent for much of last year, compared to around 12 percent for Brazil, but now is around 4-5 percent. The peso hit an eight-year high against the dollar in July. Austerity killed growth, but it kept the peso intact.

Foreign investors have treated Mexico as a haven from global volatility, as opposed to a country taking any sort of left turn.

Investors "not overly worried" about Sheinbaum

According to Pablo Riveroll, head of Latin American equities at Schroders, investors "are not overly worried" about Sheinbaum, who he characterized as a technical person "who understands the macro economy." Mexico "has no important macro imbalances," he added.

Foreign direct investment in Mexico reached \$33 billion in the first three quarters of 2023. Projections are that foreign companies will invest \$100 billion in 2024.

American capital particularly has been keen to invest in Mexico, especially with the turn to "nearshoring," as the US escalates its attempts to contain China and counter its economic growth.

Jamie Dimon, the CEO of the largest US bank, JPMorgan Chase, said in November, "I think it's one of the great opportunities. ... If you had to pick a country ... [Mexico] might be the number one opportunity."

Tesla's CEO Elon Musk announced on March 1 that it would build an electric vehicle "gigafactory" just west of the City of Monterrey in Nueva León state.

Sheinbaum has pushed "electromovilidad," the development of lithium and electric vehicles, as central to her campaign, with her describing it as "the future of the country."

The Economy Ministry reported only \$3 billion in Chinese foreign direct investment in Mexico between 2001 and 2022, but according to the Center for Chinese-Mexican Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the real figure for that period is around \$17 billion. Moreover, according to the Mexico City-based consultancy Integralia that tracks foreign investment in Mexico, Chinese companies made 19 investment announcements totaling US \$8.14 billion in the first 11 months of 2023, which would make it the second largest investor after the US.

A bipartisan group of US representatives wrote to Washington's trade representative Katherine Tai in November urging the Biden administration to raise the current 25 percent tariff on Chinese vehicles and request that it be ready to "address the coming wave of [Chinese] vehicles that will be exported from our other trading partners, such as Mexico, as [Chinese] automakers look to strategically establish operations outside of [China] to take advantage of preferential access to the US market through our free trade agreements and circumvent any [China]-specific tariffs." "Indeed,

[Chinese] automakers BYD, Chery, and SAIC Motors have already established themselves in Mexico,” the lawmakers lamented.

AMLO has begun to respond to US pressure to cut Mexico’s economic ties with China. For example, his government raised tariffs to between 2-25 percent on 90 percent of Chinese exports last year, including many products in supply chains aimed at the US market. The AMLO administration, moreover, is moving to cancel the lithium concessions of Chinese lithium giant Ganfeng, forcing the Chinese company to indefinitely postpone its target to start mining the battery metal in Mexico.

AMLO has also been a full partner in US efforts to curb immigration, particularly oppressing migrants passing through Mexico from impoverished Central American countries, Venezuela and Haiti. While often presenting a “neutral” stand on global conflicts, AMLO is aware that he is assisting the Biden administration’s efforts to use the repression of migrant workers, a chip in negotiations with Republicans for funding the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the Israeli genocide in Gaza and preparations for war against China.

Moreover, the anti-immigrant policy pursued by AMLO and Biden is paving the way for the far-right to return to power in the United States. This follows AMLO’s decision to refuse to recognize the 2020 election victory by Biden until the last minute and later his defense of Trump after the fascist coup attempt on January 6, 2021.

In December, AMLO’s government joined the fascistic Peruvian regime of Dina Boluarte in sending troops to participate in the Pentagon’s Steel Knight military exercises geared to preparations for war against China. In response to outrage over his December invitation of armed US trainers to Mexico, AMLO declared: “It is not an intrusion or infringement on our sovereignty. Times have changed since they used to enter without asking for permission.”

At a North American summit in 2021, AMLO called for “stopping China,” making clear his alignment with the US-led war drive against China.

In sum, despite all his nationalist populist rhetoric, AMLO has increasingly accommodated the interests of US imperialism down the line.

Given that both of the leading Mexican presidential candidates are women, one claiming indigenous roots, identity politics has increasingly dominated the presidential campaign. The continuing growth of inequality and threat of COVID, and other pressing issues for the Mexican working class will largely be left out of the equation.



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